

Thinking around what a radical geography “must be”

Katherine Gibson
 Institute for Culture and Society
 University of Western Sydney

Forthcoming in *Dialogues in Human Geography* 2014

Simon Springer’s essay on “Why a radical geography must be anarchist” offers both a useful overview of anarchism’s continued relevance to geography today and a lively provocation to relocate the political center of radical geography. Its insistent title certainly takes me back to the debates of the 1970s in *Antipode* when Marxist geographers were asserting their superior radical credentials over advocacy, humanist, phenomenologist and welfare geographers and any others offering critiques of the positivist and behaviourist ‘mainstream’ (Folke, 1972). It also takes me back to the early 1990s when, with Marxist geography now securely installed as the ‘radical mainstream’, proponents were busy defending their territorial boundaries against the inroads of feminism, postmodernism, and all sorts of anti-essentialist thinking (Peet, 1992; Graham, 1990, 1992). At that time there were similar attempts to state what radical geography, now referred to by Dick Peet as a “geo-materialist Marxism”, “should be” (1992: 127). Then, as now, there were passionate attempts at sub-disciplinary policing going on.

I remember the fun I had drawing a map to accompany Julie Graham’s 1992 *Antipode* paper “Anti-essentialism and Overdetermination” which was a response to Dick Peet’s rejection of a role in radical geography for anti-foundational thinking. My simple sketch map situated the Peet-Graham impasse in a mountainous cordillera, the Epistemological Divide, that separated the territory of Classical Marxism with its occupied territories (Girl-land, Queer Nation, Greenfields, Color County and Graylands) from the territory of Anti-essentialist Marxism and its sub-regions of Rortyland and Feminist PostModernTheory-land. Clearly the joint authorial persona of J.K. Gibson-Graham, still a few months from birth, was flexing her playful, some might say sacrilegious thinking muscles, in utero so to speak. Mirth was often Gibson-Graham’s response to boundary patrols, not because we didn’t and don’t respect genuine attempts to clarify political and intellectual stances, but because the attempt to speak the stance into existence via the declarative statement involving a “must” or a “should” always sounds so hollow. We came to think there were better ways to perform and persuade. Entertainment and example were strategies more to our liking. I’d like to think that these preferences display the anarchist leanings in our work, something that others have drawn attention to.

I have resisted the temptation to draw another sketch map with Springer's "truly radical" anarchist geography on one side of the politico-ethical divide and "the traditional variant" of marxist geography on the other. To do so would be too 1990s—and by now we all recognize such binary representations as passé. It would also be to make light of the important corrective work that Springer is doing in this paper to remind and perhaps (re)educate us of the incredible legacy of largely unacknowledged anarchist thinking that consciously or unconsciously informs current radical scholarship. If I were to take up my pen it would be to draw a much more complicated topography and this would challenge my limited cartographic skills. What I will do instead in this response is to think along with Springer about strategies for everyday revolution. And I will do my own bit of correcting by pointing to the many contributions that have already, from my perspective at least, dislodged "traditional Marxian analysis" from the moral, methodological and political high ground within radical geography.

Anarchism through a positive lens

In distancing anarchism from its historical misrepresentations and still current caricatures Springer presents a range of tenets central to anarchist thinking and politics. To name just some:

- an interest in insurrection rather than revolution,
- a refusal to prioritize different forms of domination,
- self-organization and non-hierarchical horizontal networks,
- do it yourself everyday direct action,
- efforts to work on changing/liberating the self,
- a refusal to construct blueprints for the future,
- a commitment to working with pre-figurative possibilities in the here and now, and
- a commitment to activating modes of self-help, mutual aid, voluntary association and self-organization.

He makes mention of how these concerns and commitments overlap with many of those of autonomous Marxism and feminism. Indeed, to me this list appears like a summary of much that is contained in Gibson-Graham's 2006 *A Postcapitalist Politics*. And in turn, our book voiced many of the coincident and subsequent concerns and commitments of those in the World Social Forum's movement of movements and the Occupy Movement. One could surmise from these observations that the legacy of anarchist thinking has indeed been powerful in that its more meaningful concerns have been successfully adopted in a wide range of political and intellectual movements. Or, in a less colonizing mode, one could be led to reflect on the multiple strains of thinking that have come together from slightly different origins to arrive at some mutually shared

positions regarding modes of transformative politics. For Gibson-Graham it was anti-foundational philosophy, anti-essentialist Marxist economics and post-modern feminism that paved the way towards these political commitments, not an explicit engagement with anarchist thought. The interesting point is to acknowledge the resultant shared tool box of strategies and tactics and see what we can make with them.

In light of these reflections I choose to side-step Springer's call for radical geographers to "do better" and acknowledge that we must adopt the anarchist label. I'd also like to navigate around Springer's move to reclaim contemporary social movements for anarchism. Both strategies, while they might produce enjoyment of a corrective nature, have a disciplining affect that undermines the very freedom and creativity of insurrection that Springer also holds dear. I would rather explore the many ways that insurrectionary geographies are already here and are informed by an eclectic mix of political and theoretical traditions, including anarchism as well as some versions of marxism, but, more importantly are researching beyond the limits of both these political theories born of 19th century conditions and concerns.

Queering state power

The caricatured anti-state focus of anarchism is well put to bed in Springer's essay, but his on-going commitment to a vision of state power as only ever coercive is curious. Certainly the state as it was in the late 19th century, to which anarchist movements were opposed, is a very different beast than what we might see as the state in the 21st century. Foucault's thinking on governmentality and counter-governmentality has radically changed the ways that we theorize governmental power, for example as not only coercive and dominating, but as also productive of new subjects and forms of subjection (see, for example, Allen, 2003; Hardt, 2011).

Currently many people are using the governmentality lens to look beyond the limits of neoliberal modes of conduct and are researching new modes of self-conduct, enabling regulatory framings and affective regimes within which post-capitalist, post-neoliberal, more than human subjects are emerging. These subjects are not necessarily anti-state or outside of state power, but they are practising various forms of horizontal self-organizing that aligns with anarchist principles. James Ferguson (2009), for example, illustrates the unstable relationship between the neoliberal project of government and the uptake of specific governmental techniques, arguing that techniques such as the Basic Income Grant and cash transfers instead of in-kind food aid introduced by the South African state are enabling economic experimentation with the emergence of self-organized

livelihood networks in the diverse informal economy. Lest Ferguson's research be read as an example of anarcho-proto-capitalism at work, we can be encouraged by William Connolly's (2013) piercing analysis and critique of the restricted way the concept of unconscious self-organization enters into neoliberal thinking. Connolly delinks the equation between spontaneous impersonal self-organization and impersonal market rationality that is so lauded by neoliberal ideologues. It is not only anarchism, but also various kinds of science studies, that alert us to the self-organizing properties of multiple systems both human and nonhuman, and the creativity and collective self-amplification that such properties can ignite (Connolly, 2013:15). So it is very possible to imagine, as in Ferguson's example, non-capitalist economic self-organizing emerging from neoliberal state policy.

What we observe here is the practice of queering the political and economic landscape and resisting the capitalocentric 'lining up' of ideology, technique, practice, motivation and outcome (Gibson-Graham 1996). But there is resistance to this strategy of widening the cracks for other worlds to appear. On one hand, we have the traditional Marxist denunciations of everyday direct action, such as that referred to by Ferguson, as eminently co-optable by capital. On the other, we have anarchists denouncing the state as hierarchical, violent and anti-democratic and always already in service to capital. Springer is disturbed by the attacks of the former but appears to adhere to the essentialism of the co-option argument when it comes to the state. Both strategies end up performing the power of capitalist discourse.

As I see it the challenge for anarchist geography would be to engage seriously with state power and the many ways that it circulates top down, bottom up, roundabout and inside out, coercing, creating, regulating, restricting and enabling modes of self-organization. It would also be to explore anarchism's attachment to a coercive state and the fantasy of free association absent of imposed authority. It would be ask what might forms of anarchist governmentality be and how might state institutions and policy enable it?

Complex agency

Despite the ever recurring appeal of revolution-talk à la Dean (2012), I would like to think that most people have given up on waiting for the revolution (see Gibson-Graham, 1995; 2008; 2014). Certainly I'd like to think they have given up on waiting for a revolution led by a vanguard of card carrying marxists of a masculine kind who still consider that judging and disciplining are ways of enrolling support. I have the distinct feeling, however, that the interest in every day

revolutions, or insurrection, in Springer's terms, is strong. Certainly the insurrectionary potential of the everyday is a topic that many geographers are researching—whether it is by practicing permaculture (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2010), self-managed urban activism (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010) or household sustainability (Gibson et al 2013).

As Springer acknowledges, the work of Gibson-Graham and others influenced by the diverse economies research program are highlighting 'other worlds' by bringing to the fore the everyday experiments in building ethical economies that are occurring all over the world (see, for example, Miller, 2013; Roelvink, St Martin and Gibson-Graham, 2014; Cornwell, et al 2014). The range of research conducted by members of the Community Economies Collective illustrates the productivity of queering the economy and reading the so-called 'capitalist' landscape for economic difference. As a way of extending the discussion of everyday revolution I would like to draw attention to the distinctive ways our action research is generating innovative political enactments and contributing to new visions of agency.

In the experiments we both document and help to initiate, anarchist organizing principles of direct action, self-help, mutual aid, voluntary association and self-organization can play an important role. We are interested in specific ways of practicing ethical economic interdependence and liberating the self, including practices of work-life time balancing, surplus sharing, care for our encounters with human and non-human, commoning of property, investment in reparative action for environments and in infrastructure to support future generations (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy, 2013). We do not preclude the creative or enabling potential of a wide range of organizing strategies and foci including those that emerge from a variety of political movements such as trade unionism (regulating paid working hours), feminism (gendered work/life balance), marxism (equitable sharing of surplus between producers and non-producers), trade justice (fair returns to labour and to environments), environmentalism (stewardship of other species and ecologies), indigenous activism (intergenerational social and ecological care) and welfareism (intergenerational investment and redistribution). We have, thus, extended our concerns beyond the positive organizational commitments associated with anarchist politics and as such are open to a wide variety of strategies that may be ushering in revolutionary everyday ways of being.

Political agency is being rethought in this work. Rather than stick with agency as purely a human capacity, we are interested in appreciating distributed forms of complex agency whereby the

inanimate and non-human are seen as part of agentic assemblages. Here we draw inspiration from multiple streams such as actor-network theory, the ecological humanities work on multi-species being, and political theorists of becoming and vital materialism. If we are seriously interested in the prefiguration of other worlds, we are being invited by many other schools of contemporary thinking to look for “undetermined stories-so-far” (Springer page) not exclusively within human society, but within more than human assemblages.

To conclude, let me express my gratitude to Simon Springer for this provocation. Radical geography in its broadest sense is making major contributions to knowledge horizons today. The exciting range of radical geographic research remains somewhat unacknowledged in the way that Geography always seems to shrink from popular acclaim in comparison to other disciplines with their Nobel Prize winners and public intellectuals. But our scholarship turns up in remarkable places and is drawn upon by a wide range of practitioners, both academic and activist. Rather than recenter radical geography on one political tradition, no matter how attached to freedom it might be, I am more attracted to appreciating the heterogeneity of perspectives and methods that flourish under its rubric. To my mind, the protean process by which insurrection creates new worlds exceeds any one name. I welcome the opportunity that this paper has offered to expand upon and hone my ever evolving answers to the the question of what, for me, constitutes the practice of radical geography today.

References

- Allen, J. 2003 *Lost Geographies of Power*, Oxford and Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing.
- Connolly, W.E. 2013 *The Fragility of Things*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Cornwell J., Johnson M., and Trott, A. with Julie Graham. 2014 *Building Co-operative Power: Stories and Strategies from Co-operatives in the Connecticut River Valley* Amherst Ma, Levellers Press(forthcoming).
- Chatterton, P. and Pickerill, J. 2010 “Everyday activism and transitions towards post-capitalist worlds” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographer* 35, 4: 475–490.
- Dean, J. 2012 *The Communist Horizon*, London: Verso.
- Ferguson, J. 2009 “The uses of neoliberalism” *Antipode* 41: 166-184.
- Gibson, C, Farbotko, C, Gill, N, Head, L and Waitt, G. 2013 *Household sustainability: challenges and dilemmas in everyday life*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, UK

- Gibson-Graham, J.K. 1993 “Waiting for the revolution, or how to smash capitalism while working at home in your spare time” *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 6, 2: 10-24.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. 2006 *A Postcapitalist Politics* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. 2008 “Place-based globalism?: a new imaginary of revolution” *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 20, 4: 659-664.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. 2014 “Being the Revolution, or, How to Live in a “More-Than-Capitalist” World Threatened with Extinction” *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 26, 1: 76-94.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K., Cameron, J. and Healy, S. 2013 *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming Our Communities* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Hardt, M. 2011 “The militancy of theory” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, 1: 19-35.
- Miller, E. 2013 “Ontology, ethics and politics for radically-democratic economic organizing” *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 25, 4: 518-533
- Puig de la Bellacasa, M. 2010 “Ethical doings in naturecultures” *Ethics, Place and Environment: A Journal of Philosophy and Geography* 13, 2: 151-169.
- Roelvink, G., St. Martin, K. and Gibson-Graham, J.K. eds 2014 *Performing Diverse Economies* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (forthcoming).

Abstract

Thinking around what a radical geography “must be”

Simon Springer’s essay on “Why a radical geography must be anarchist” offers both a useful overview of anarchism’s continued relevance to geography today and a lively provocation to relocate the political center of radical geography. In this response I think along with Springer about strategies for everyday revolution and point to many contributions that already dislodged “traditional Marxian analysis” from the moral, methodological and political high ground within radical geography. I explore some of the ways that insurrectionary geographies are being practised and are informed by an eclectic mix of political and theoretical traditions, including anarchism as well as some versions of marxism, but, more importantly are researching beyond the limits of both these political theories born of 19th century conditions and concerns.